

BASIC WRITING, COST EFFECTIVENESS, AND IDEOLOGY

ABSTRACT: The debate about required composition courses like Basic Writing, some of which played out in JBW in the 1990s, has taken on new urgency given recent decisions and inclinations to eliminate such courses at four-year colleges in CUNY and elsewhere. This essay revisits that debate, particularly a strand of it that took place in the pages of this journal, and argues for movement beyond a perceived either/or dilemma.

As I recall images of fifteen years of teaching Basic Writing at the City University of New York, the accompanying sound track includes a persistent refrain: "Keith, it's not cost effective." Some administrators uttered the phrase sternly, some sympathetically. But all spoke those words invariably when, mostly as a WPA, I offered suggestions about reducing class sizes, making full-time hires in composition, or reconfiguring course credits. I always stressed the notion of *effective* relative to matters of student learning and discursal positioning, but almost always *cost* ruled. Such expense-oriented educational pronouncements by college administrators are not solely responsible for the full attack on Basic Writing in the CUNY system now underway, as summarized in Barbara Gleason's "Remediation Phase-Out at CUNY," but such rhetoric serves the assault, one that has been developing for years, well. When conservative officials expel Basic Writing and its generative possibilities from four-year colleges, partly to serve the purposes of corporate elites, as radical critics remind us, they sell the restrictive move to the larger public with rap about standards, quality, and fiscal responsibility. The real deal, however, is that investing sufficiently in a university population that consists of a solid majority of people of color, who suffer disproportionately at the hands of the corporate elite, does not rank highly on conservative agendas.

Diminished possibilities, both in terms of funding, curriculum, and my own teaching creativity factored into my decision to leave

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CUNY in 1994. I left, though, fairly wise about writing practices and forever curious about what was going on back “home.” I am, therefore, grateful for the chance to contribute to *JBW*, one of the most important intellectual components of CUNY. In fact, I have chosen to chime in on a conversation about “new abolitionism” that has evolved in the journal over the past four or five years, one that is vital because it speaks to the very rationale for Basic Writing and for required composition courses overall; therefore, it is a conversation relevant to the up-to-the-minute situation at CUNY and elsewhere. Ironically, I am stuck once again on the question of cost effectiveness. I guess administrators taught me well, though of course I am focusing (always have really) on the long-term social costs of policy positions we assume, not on the immediate bottom lines with which too many administrators are obsessed.

The strand of thinking I am referencing began with a 1995 article by Ed White titled “The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed under the New Elitism.” White expresses wariness over neoconservative moves to undermine initiatives such as Basic Writing, programs that in his view signal the egalitarian ideal in education. He presents the results of large-scale studies conducted in California and New Jersey that indicate the worth of appropriate placement programs coupled with well conceived instructional designs. Fully cognizant of the exclusionary, gate-keeping function that writing courses under any name may serve, White nonetheless maintains that certain kinds of required courses help to further an ameliorating mission. I am generally sympathetic to White’s position, even as I recognize several legitimate debates that could ensue from the position he takes. However, the spiciest part of his critique is his charge that academics like Sharon Crowley who call for an end to required writing courses are in league, albeit unwittingly, with forces that aim to limit access and success for traditionally underrepresented students. Crowley objects of course in her 1996 response. And rightfully so. She couldn’t be farther removed from being the Right’s house theorist. But her new abolitionist position is fraught with problems, the main one being the relinquishing in academe of hard won, potentially radical, spaces. If “critical literacy is both a narrative for agency as well as a referent for critique,” as Henry Giroux argues(10), and if the purpose of a general education is to help position students to question systematically and perhaps even contest the forces that dominate their lives rather than to train them to become simply the victims or even “innocent” beneficiaries of those forces, then any space one gets to promote agency and critical faculty is valuable territory not to be conceded. Whether we call it Basic Writing, Freshman Composition, or whatever, sites that privilege the development of authentic student voices and enable more sophisticated analyses of discursive practices and the re-

lations of those practices to power are as worthy of being required as any courses in the academy. Naturally, my position presupposes that such sites should simultaneously be progressive with respect to labor practices and the distribution of credits to students. What I am arguing as well is that the stress on empirical evidence to justify such courses, a matter White and Crowley seem to agree upon, is mostly beside the point. If we do not ask if there is need for required composition but, rather, if there is need to teach critical language awareness, of which producing text is a central part, whenever we can command sites to do so, I cannot fathom how the radically inclined can answer in the negative. Empirical studies are necessary to document good work, but they are not needed to make the initial case.

Crowley correctly points to Harvard University as the origin of the universal composition requirement, a practice that was exclusionary from the outset given its use to stamp the "Harvard man." Crowley writes, "I doubt whether the exclusionary institutional function of the universal requirement can be radically altered at this late date in its history" (89) and "I doubt whether we serve 'new students' well by using mass examinations to segregate them into classrooms that can be readily identified as remedial or special" (90). *Doubt* seems a rather weak expression of mindset when attached to such radical new abolitionist proposals. But such intellectual caution is appropriate. It's not the strongest argument to make a case against a practice merely because of its origins. That rules out the revolutionary possibilities of appropriation. English itself, much less its written, academically sanctioned versions, has served slavery, colonialism, class oppression, and gender exploitation. And although there is talk from time to time of limiting its reach around the world, the practical situation is that it's a major linguistic tool we have had to and will have to employ. The civil rights, women's liberation, and students' movements that Crowley and I both take pride in were all floated on various forms English. Some of those forms, like Black English Vernacular, were forged in the crucible of resistance and struggle. African Americans as a whole did not, like Morrison's Sixo, give up on English because there was no future in it. They cast a future largely in Africanized English. This is an instructive example.

I am certainly no fan of old-style Harvard elitism. All that snobishness is a heavy tab to pay to get a Du Bois or Cornel West every eighty years. Talk about cost *ineffective*. I've always placed great credence in the joke that Harvard has ruined more Black men than bad whiskey (a joke I've heard with Yale, Princeton, and other schools substituted). Nonetheless, the point is that structures, from wherever they derive, can and do serve as vehicles for change. Such structures have to be corrupted – when they can be.

Around the same time White was writing for *JBW*, and a year

after I left CUNY, I attended a Basic Writing symposium at the University of Pittsburgh coordinated by Jim Seitz. At the gathering, at which Deborah Mutnick of Long Island University, a former graduate student of mine who was still teaching Basic Writing, also spoke, I articulated an abolitionist position. Indeed it was impossible to defend, as Ira Shor often points out insightfully, Basic Writing as practiced by many institutions, especially several of the colleges of CUNY. I had seen firsthand, indeed participated in, some of the inane recycling of students through non-credit courses, the skill-and-drill silliness, misdirected — but hey, cost effective — testing crazes, and exploitative personnel practices. I argued then that without being able to better demonstrate the efficacy of Basic Writing, we perhaps ought to do away with it altogether. However, at that symposium I heard from and met a group of Deborah's students who reaffirmed for me the possibilities of Basic Writing. Not simply did they write, present, and perform in noteworthy fashion, they argued cogently for the worth of their experiences in Basic Writing. That was a fine demonstration of narrative agency, not up to certain empirical standards, but still sound evidence to me, which was backed up by Deborah's subsequent book *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education*. Of course testimonials will never answer the question of how we know whether students would have fared as well or better if they had not taken Basic Writing, a question often posed by Shor. Responding, in his 1997 *JBW* article, "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality," to statistics supplied by Karen Greenberg about the percentage of Hunter College graduates who were basic writing graduates, Shor argued that "These figures mean very little. What must be proved is that these students could not have graduated without BW" (96). That can never be proved, and Shor and every methodologist knows that. You cannot prove a negative. So the *must* Shor speaks of cannot possibly be the variable upon which debate hinges. Moreover, we do not construct useful educational theories based on the *absence* of phenomena; the point is to study the phenomena that do occur and make the most intelligent and informed judgment we can about what the phenomena signify. Deborah's students were positive signifiers, as were my own students in my Basic Writing classes on the best of days.

To be clear, I make no blanket endorsement of Basic Writing programs. I am just as likely to favor certain "mainstreaming" efforts like the program run by Barbara Gleason and Mary Soliday at City College. Shor mentioned the project, one I evaluated, as did Sharon Crowley. The high points of my work were my interviews with students, some of whom hailed from Haiti, Nigeria, India, Poland, South Korea, Grenada, Guyana, The Dominican Republic, and the USA. Almost all of them testified to the intensity and rigor of the courses they

had taken; some wanted more writing courses. Nearly all had entertained initial doubts about their academic abilities but subsequently expressed confidence in their prospects for continuing in college. The point to make here is simple; if you have a good show, go with it, whatever the institutional structure that has to be worked.

Ira Shor got a lot of things right, as he usually does, in that 1997 *JBW* piece. He is virtually nonpareil in his macro-level analysis of the connections between required composition and U. S. political economy, and he makes a powerful statement of the new abolitionist idea. But I also think the responses to his article by Greenberg and Terry Collins have considerable merit. They are aware that Shor's bleak Basic Writing landscape doesn't adequately account for sites like Mutnick's classes or properly reckon with the fact that there is no uniform set of practices, or even definition, of Basic Writing. They allow for more possibilities in Basic Writing courses and express some legitimate concerns. As Greenberg asks with respect to the abolition of Basic Writing:

Does anyone really believe that students will be able to get this help in freshman composition courses, where the class size is larger, where dialect variation is often perceived as "error," and where the demands are for college-level conceptualization, organization, fluency, and mastery of English conventions?
(92)

This question is also relevant to the notion of abolishing required Freshman English, which brings me to another question I ponder when I consider new abolitionism. If we, with all of our critical perspectives on literacy, relinquish our required claim on students inside the institutions in which we work, where will they attain the valuable knowledge we could help them create in required courses? In writing and rhetoric electives, which relatively few would take? In literature courses where they still have a better chance of getting shot down by the Western European canon than being lifted by progressive pedagogy? Which disciplines are less oppressive? Philosophy, the racist Enlightenment version? History, "his story?" Rather than that kind of abandonment, I prefer policies that will give students the greatest chance possible to learn from people like Crowley and Greenberg.

Terry Collins acknowledges that

Shor is surely right that there is a history of exclusionist practice in higher education, grounded in race, class, and gender assumptions, and some practices in writing instruction and tracking are undoubtedly tied to this history. It is an unfair corollary that there is a Basic Writing industry acting out a cynical apartheid agenda. Rather, there are any number of

situated, institutionally constrained iterations of things like "Basic Writing," some more fortunately located than others, some more successful in resisting pariah status than others, some formed with more authentic educational purposes than others. (99)

I take this to be a fair assessment and is a view compatible with some of the best thinking in the field, Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu's *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, for example. And having visited Terry at the University of Minnesota, I can say that he is another scholar you want students to be around. But there exist too few productive sites, and many blatantly unproductive ones, the reason Shor's critique is yet necessary even if it is not to be embraced absolutely. Shor thinks composition's future lies in discipline-based, field-based, critical social work. Critical? Field? Fine. But I'm not all the way on board with that vision for I'm not ready to give up an important interdisciplinary site, which I think courses in critical language awareness can be. Sure, required writing courses reproduce dominant ideologies, serve regulatory ends, and stifle creativity, but that is not all they do. The possibility for challenge and change, which could mean sustained access and opportunity for many students, is undeniably present. Some of us know this through personal experience both as students and teachers. We challenged and lost, then won, then lost, persevered to win some more. . .and so it goes.

Valued colleagues are doing tremendous work in various locations. Most of these locations are unstable and we ought not to aid in their further destabilization by theorizing their category out of existence from afar. We should support and enhance critical practice where we find it. We cannot afford otherwise.

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